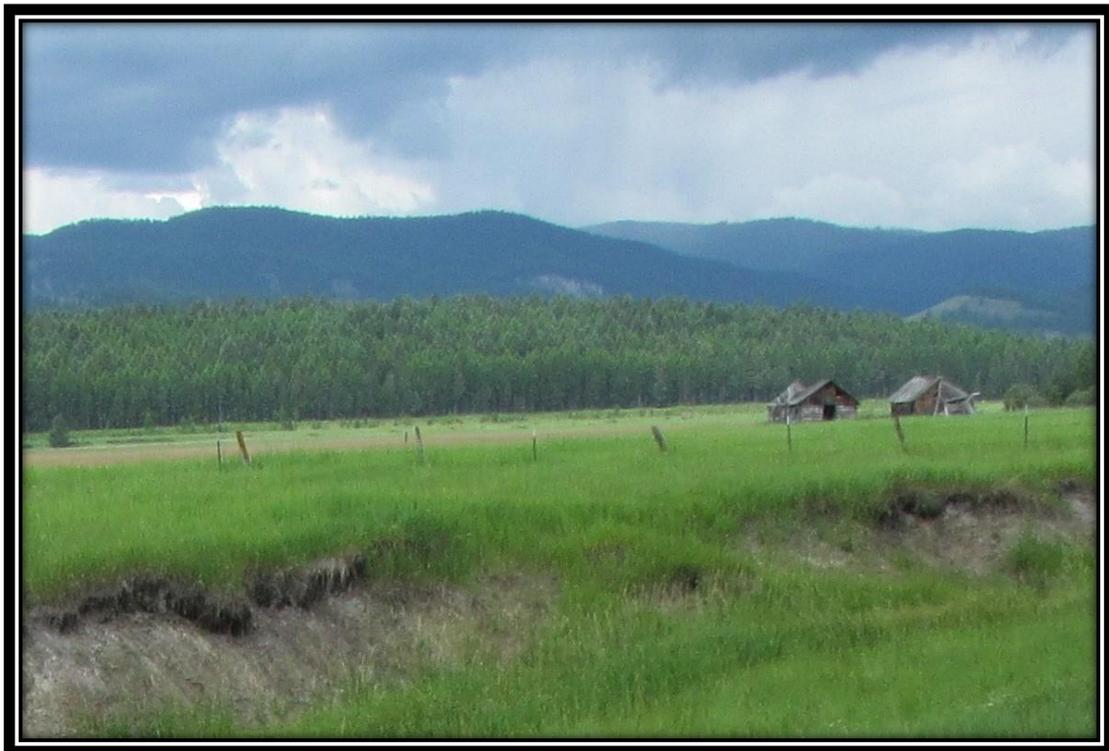


Draft Environmental Assessment Single-Year Agricultural Lease at Ray Kuhns Wildlife Management Area



Pre-Draft Environmental Assessment MEPA, NEPA, MCA 23-1-110 CHECKLIST

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of proposed state action: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to lease approximately 50 acres of the 1,530-acre Ray Kuhns Wildlife Management Area for a period of one-year to evaluate site suitability for agriculture. If successful, FWP will competitively bid a multi-year lease with the intent of using farming to increase wildlife forage and cover, weed control, and improved soil health (Map 1).

2. Agency authority for the proposed action: FWP has the authority under Section 87-1-210 MCA to protect, enhance and regulate the use of Montana’s fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and into the future. Through 87-1-209 MCA, FWP is also authorized to establish leases on land under its control in exchange for services to be provided by the lessee on the leased land. In accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, FWP is required to assess the impacts that any proposal or project might have on the natural and human environments. FWP’s land lease-out policy, as it pertains to the disposition of interests in Department lands (87-1-209) requires an Environmental Assessment (EA) be written for all new agricultural leases, lease extensions or lease renewals.

3. Anticipated Schedule:

Public Comment Period:	August 15 – September 3
Decision Notice:	September 10

4. Location affected by proposed action (county, range and township):

The Ray Kuhns Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in northwest Montana is located approximately 9 miles north of Kalispell, off Farm to Market Road. Ray Kuhns WMA comprises 1,530 acres in Township 30 N, Range 22 W, portions of Section 20, 21, 28, 29, and 33; and Township 29 N, Range 22 W, portions of section 6 (Bowser Lake), Flathead County. The 50-acre lease area includes portions of: S29, T30 N, R22 W TR4, TR3, TR5 IN NE4, and S28, T30 N, R22 W, TR4 IN NW4NW4.

5. Project size -- estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	<u>0</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
		Irrigated cropland	<u>0</u>
(b) Open Space/ Woodlands/Recreation	<u>0</u>	Dry cropland	<u>50</u>
		Forestry	<u>0</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian Areas	<u>0</u>	Rangeland	<u>0</u>
		Other	<u>0</u>

6. Listing of any other Local, State or Federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction.

(a) **Permits:** Permits will be filed at least 2 weeks prior to project start.

<u>Agency Name</u>	<u>Permits</u>
NONE REQUIRED	

(b) Funding: There will be no cost to the agency to lease these fields.

(c) Other Overlapping or Additional Jurisdictional Responsibilities:

<u>Agency Name</u>	<u>Type of Responsibility</u>
NONE	

7. Narrative summary of the proposed action or project including the benefits and purpose of the proposed action:

The Ray Kuhns Wildlife Management area provides critical winter range for big game, particularly whitetail deer. Mixed timber covers approximately 1,200 acres of the 1,530-acre WMA. During winter, deer congregate in the timbered valley bottom of the WMA and adjacent State Trust lands, sheltering in the thermal cover provided by mixed stands of conifer. Winter deer densities can approach 500 head per square-mile. In spring, deer disperse throughout the Salish Range -- Hunting District 102. In recognition of the area’s importance to wintering wildlife, the Department began protecting the area through acquisition, starting with a 40-acre acquisition around Bowser Lake purchased in 1953. Ray Kuhns’ 1974 bequest of 1,165 acres grew the WMA substantially, and today the WMA totals 1,530 acres.

In his bequest, Ray Kuhns directed two existing agricultural leases be honored with a life tenancy, or so long as desired by the tenant. Life-tenancies included woodland pasture (310 acres) and grain and hay fields (180 acres). Recently, life-tenancies have been relinquished and FWP has assumed management of those areas. Woodland pastures have been out of production for over a decade, and will remain so. However, agricultural fields at the north end of the property, totaling 130 acres, have a varied cultivation history. Abandoned gradually and without plans for rehabilitation, former fields are slowly converting to perennial vegetation or weeds and generally provide poor quality wildlife habitat. The northern two fields (80 acres) are dominated by European hay species, while the most recently abandoned field (2015), to the south (50 acres), is uneven and dominated by weeds, bare ground and quackgrass (Figure 1). In their current state, these fields provide limited wildlife value. The most recently abandoned field is on a declining trajectory.

Over the past winter, FWP contacted area farmers to assess their interest in a grain farming lease to help clean up the site. None were interested because of the deteriorated condition of the fields, and concerns about heavy soils and poor productivity. With no local producer interested in taking on a multi-year lease on unproven ground, FWP contracted with a local farmer to prepare the worst area, the 50-acre southern field, for planting, with a goal of demonstrating the site’s potential. This spring, standing biomass was removed, and the field was sprayed-out and chiseled-plowed in preparation for a fall planting.

The farmer that prepared the site is willing to take on a one-year farming lease, planting winter wheat this fall, to “prove up” whether the field is a viable farm lease or not. In addition, the farming activity would help further clean up the site over the upcoming growing season. The lessee would take on all risk of failure, at no cost to FWP, as the agricultural site potential is undetermined. FWP’s end goal is to demonstrate the site’s viability and attract a farmer interested in a longer-term lease arrangement through a competitive bid process.

Under the proposed action, the lessee would cultivate and plant winter wheat, retaining the entire harvest. The lessee would leave stubble standing. In addition, the lessee would be responsible for weed control within the leased area.

Lease duration would be for a single growing season, with the goal of demonstrating site suitability for annual crop production. During the spring of 2020, while the crop is growing, FWP would publicly solicit interest for a competitively bid 5-year farming lease opportunity, based on what is growing on the site.

The proposed action would involve 50-acres of prepared ground planted into winter wheat, demonstrate suitability of agriculture soils, return former fields to productivity, enhance soil health, and improve weed control. This is a no-cost action that would improve FWP's long-term management options for the property, ultimately enhancing effective wildlife habitat, improving hunting opportunities, and reducing weed control expenses. By demonstrating the site's agricultural potential, FWP may be better able to attract interested growers for a multi-year lease and negotiate terms that would benefit wildlife and the long-term management of the property.



Figure 1: This 50-acre field has been idle since tillage in spring of 2015. Ground was uneven, with Canada thistle, pineapple weed, quackgrass, and bare ground dominating. In spring and summer, 2019, FWP contracted site preparation, spraying and tillage, to prepare the site for a fall planting.

8. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives (including the no action alternative) to the proposed action whenever alternatives are reasonably available and prudent to consider and a discussion of how the alternatives would be implemented:

Alternative A: No Action:

Under the No Action Alternative, FWP would need to either contract a farmer to plant and manage the recently prepared 50-acre field, or leave the area fallow and lose the opportunity to demonstrate agricultural suitability of the site.

Contracting for services would commit additional FWP resources to property management. Fallowing the area would forgo the opportunity to demonstrate site suitability for agriculture, increase weeds, commit additional FWP resources for weed and field management, impact wildlife habitat values and ultimately reduce hunting opportunity.

Alternative B: Proposed Action:

Under the Proposed Action, FWP would lease 50 acres of prepared ground for a period of one-year for the mutual benefit of wildlife, FWP and the lessee. The lease opportunity would not be competitively bid, but instead awarded to a local farmer willing to assume the financial risk of planting unproven ground to aid FWP's demonstration of the site's agricultural potential. The lessee would plant winter wheat and retain the entire harvest. During the 2020 growing season, while the crop is growing, FWP would publicly solicit interest for a competitive 5-year farming lease, based on what is growing on site. Given the condition of the unproven ground, no fee would be charged for the lease.

The proposed action would:

- Demonstrate the site's agricultural potential
- Control noxious weeds through agricultural practices and the competitiveness of the planted crop
- Reduce FWP property management costs
- Attract farmer interest in a multiple-year agricultural lease in exchange for leaving a portion of the harvest standing in the field for wildlife forage and cover
- Restore agricultural productivity to abandoned farm land
- Contribute to the economic viability of valley agriculture
- And ultimately improve wildlife forage, cover and soil health

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

3. Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		X				
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?		X				
c. Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				
f. Other:						

2. <u>AIR</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)			X			2a.
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		X				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. For P-R/D-J* projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a.)			X			2a
f. Other:						

2a. Under the Proposed Action, there would be minor impacts to air quality from farm equipment emissions.

*Pittman-Robertson (P-R) Dingell-Johnson (D-J) projects are those funded with money from these two federal programs. These dollars originate from a federal excise tax that hunters and anglers pay on the equipment they purchase to pursue their favorite outdoor activities and are allocated to each state fish and wildlife agency from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

3. <u>WATER</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?		X				
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?			X			3h.
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		X				
m. For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		X				
n. Other:						

3h. Under the Proposed Action, the potential for minor impacts to water quality exists with the use of herbicides and pesticides. The lessee must comply with all provisions of federal and state laws regarding the use of such substances which will minimize any potential impacts.

4. <u>VEGETATION</u> Will the proposed action result in?	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			X			4a.
b. Alteration of a plant community?			X Positive			4a.
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?			X Positive			4e.
f. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		X				
g. Other:						

4a. Action area has gradually fallen out of agricultural production as life-tenancies have expired or tenant farmer has lost interest. Field abandonment has been without forethought to future field condition and fields are becoming increasingly less desirable to wildlife as weeds encroach and brome expands. With management control officially reverting to FWP, the agency has an opportunity to use agriculture as a management tool to enhance wildlife forage and cover and improve public hunting opportunities. FWP also anticipates felling a handful of young trees along existing access routes to improve access for conventional farm equipment. Most of these trees have encroached since the cessation of regular farming activities.

4e. Under the proposed alternative, lessee would be responsible for noxious weeds management within agricultural areas, reducing FWP's weed control costs.

5. <u>FISH/WILDLIFE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animal or game bird species?			X Positive			5b.
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?			X Positive			5b.
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?		X				
h. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)		X				
i. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		X				
j. Other:						

5b. Game and nongame species will benefit from increased field productivity, which will provide both increased forage and cover for wildlife.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?			X			6a.
b. Exposure of people to serve or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				
e. Other:						

6a. Sound from operations of farming equipment will be sporadic and short-term in duration, and similar to that created by farming activities occurring throughout the area.

7. <u>LAND USE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?			X Positive			7a.
b. Conflict with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				
e. Other:						

7a. Field renovation will restore agricultural productivity and profitability.

8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?			X			8a.
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		X				
e. Other:						

8a. Under the Proposed Action, there is the potential for minor impacts from the use of fertilizers and pesticides. The farmer will comply with all provisions of federal and state laws governing the usage of these substances to minimize risk.

9. <u>COMMUNITY IMPACT</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?			X Positive			9c.
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?		X				
f. Other:						

9c. Under the Proposed Action, field productivity would be restored, contributing to the viability of the local agricultural economy.

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:		X				
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. Define projected revenue sources		X				10e.
f. Define projected maintenance costs.			X Positive			10f.
g. Other:						

10e Under the Proposed Action, there would be no monetary revenue generated from the project.

10f. Under the Proposed Action, additional costs to FWP associated with periodic monitoring of agricultural production and weeds will be minimal since the WMA is routinely monitored by FWP.

11. <u>AESTHETICS/RECREATION</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?		X				
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				
c. Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings?			X Positive			11c.
d. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		X				
e. Other:						

11c. Under the Proposed Action, renewed agricultural activities should increase the public's wildlife viewing and hunting opportunities on the WMA.

12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. **Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		X				
e. Other:						

The project area has been farmed for decades, and therefore no new or added impacts are anticipated under the Proposed Action.

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. <u>SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE</u> Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		X				
g. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , list any federal or state permits required.		X				

Under the Proposed Action, there would be no direct cumulative or secondary impacts.

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

Ray Kuhns WMA provides critical winter habitat for whitetail deer. The property is closed to public access from December 1 – May 14 to protect wintering wildlife. Gates and fences around the WMA prevent vehicle access. Farming practices will be limited to seasons that minimize wildlife disturbance as much as possible.

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

This analysis did not reveal any significant impacts to the human or physical environment. No additional construction or improvements of any kind are included in this proposal. The current WMA rules provide for seasonal closures to protect wintering wildlife.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public Involvement for this project:

The public will be notified in the following manner to comment on this draft EA:

- Public notices to the Flathead Beacon and Daily InterLake.
- One statewide press release.
- Public notice on the FWP website: <http://fwp.mt.gov>

In addition, the draft EA is available at Region One FWP headquarters in Kalispell and copies were also distributed to neighboring landowners, current farming contractors, and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.

Duration of Comment Period:

This draft will be out for a 2-week public review through September 3rd, 2019. Comments can be mailed to the address below:

Franz Ingelfinger
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
490 North Meridian Rd
Kalispell, MT 59901

Or email: fingelfinger@mt.gov

PART V. EA PREPARATION

1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? No

Based upon the above assessment, which has identified a limited number of minor impacts from the Proposed Action, an EIS is not required and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of review.

2. Name, title, address and phone number of the person(s) responsible for preparing the EA:

Franz Ingelfinger, Restoration Ecologist, Kalispell, MT
Neil Anderson, FWP Wildlife Division Program Manager, Kalispell, MT
Alan Wood, FWP Wildlife Mitigation Coordinator, Kalispell, MT
Ethan Lula, FWP Wildlife Biologist, Eureka, MT

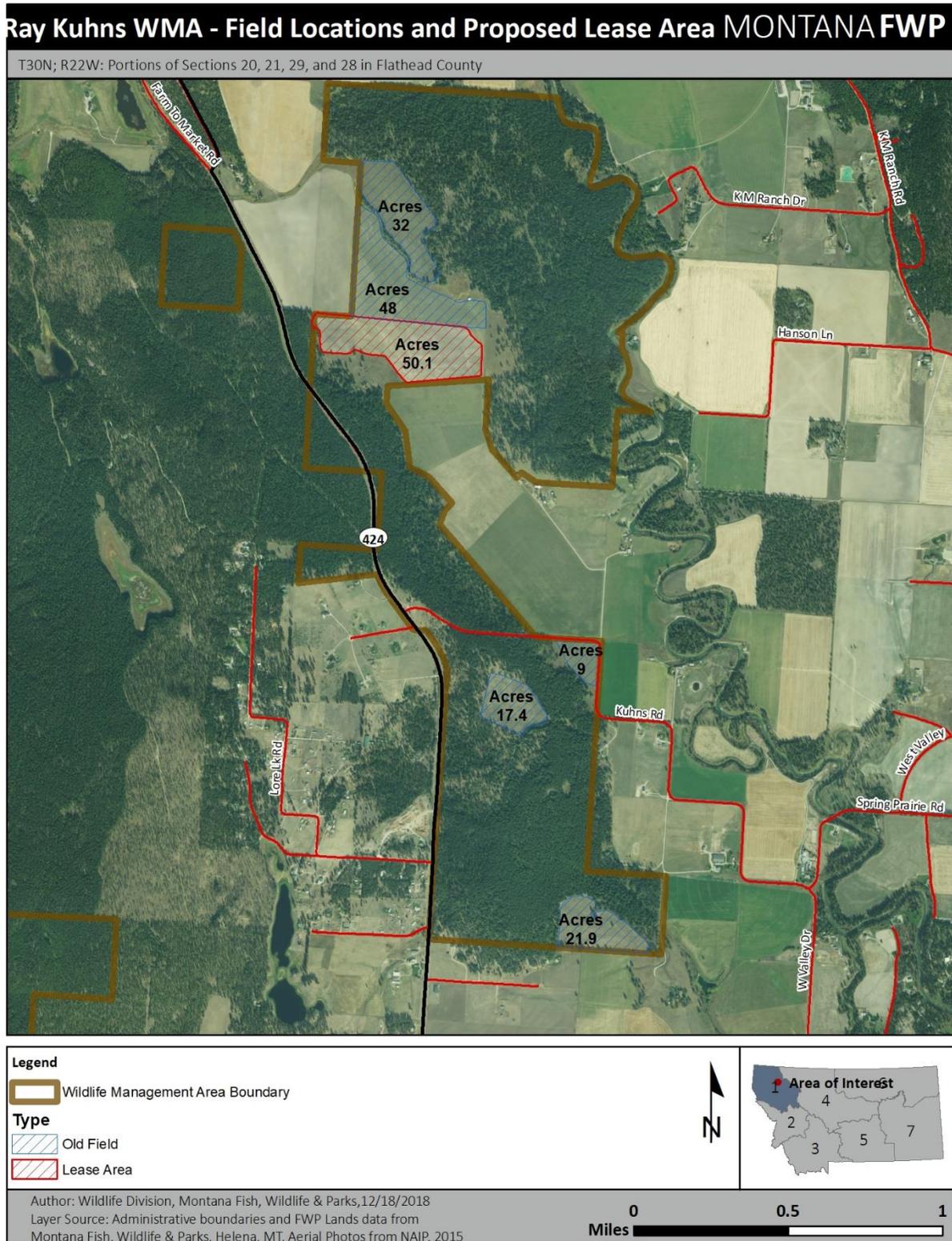
3. List of agencies consulted during preparation of the EA:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Wildlife Division

APPENDICES

A. Property Maps

Map 1: Overview of Proposed Agricultural Lease Area



Map 2: Northern Fields and Lease Area

